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# Baucus confident EPA will remove insulation

**BY ROGER MORRIS**  
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U.S. Sen. Max Baucus said Thursday he was confident that the Environmental Protection Agency would be removing vermiculite insulation from Libby area homes and businesses.

Baucus was in Libby for a brief visit with groups on asbestos related issues. He met earlier in the day with representatives from the Center for Asbestos Related Disease to discuss ongoing health care needs and asbestos screening.

At the Libby Library, Baucus expressed his optimism about the removal of insulation.

Baucus had discussed the issue with Christy Todd Whitman, EPA director, shortly before leaving Kalispell for Libby.

"I hoped to be on a telephone

connection for the meeting between the EPA and W.R. Grace officials," Baucus told a small gathering in the library basement. "They didn't want me on the telephone. I don't know who 'they' is."

Grace management made a presentation to EPA officials in Washington, D.C. Thursday with Region 8 EPA representatives in attendance.

"I talked to Director Whitman this afternoon and she was not at that meeting herself," Baucus said. "She said she was very impressed with Paul's (Peronard) presentation to remove the insulation."

"She also said she thought that in fairness, because Paul and Region 8 made their recommendation, W.R. Grace should be allowed to make a presentation."

Peronard, the onsite coordinator

for the Libby cleanup of asbestos contaminated vermiculite, is asking for a health emergency to be declared in Libby so the EPA can remove insulation from buildings. Federal Superfund law doesn't allow the EPA to remove the material without a declaration, something the EPA has not done before.

"I'm quite convinced, talking to her, it really comes down to what protects the health of the people of Libby," the senator said. "If you read between the lines, I'm quite sure she's going to make that announcement."

Baucus said Whitman wants to make the decision soon so the coming construction season is not lost.

"I told her if the decision is adverse we want our chance and the

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U.S. Senator Max Baucus talks to Libby area residents during a brief meeting at the library Jan. 30.

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EPA should come to Libby for a meeting," Baucus continued. "I feel quite strongly she's going to side with Libby."

Concerns were raised in the audience that not everyone in Libby would allow the EPA to remove the insulation from their buildings jeopardizing the "clean bill of health" needed to overcome adverse publicity.

Also, there are some people who would like to seal the material in attics and walls and not remove it, said asbestos victim's advocate Gayla Benefield.

"I honestly don't feel people in the community are going to feel comfortable with sealing it," said Ron Anderson, county sanitarian.

Shelly Spencer, the mother of two young girls, held up 8x10 photographs of her children. "I have two beautiful girls," she started to say and then broke down crying.

Vermiculite is leaking into her home from the attic, said Benefield, and she can't get out.

"My house has been tested and it's bad," Spencer sobbed. "They won't test my children because of the latency period."

Dale Herreid, owner of Libby Plumbing, said he won't go into attics or spaces insulated with vermiculite. It is not only for his own health safety but he is afraid someone will sue him for stirring up the dust. "They can't get anything from Grace," he said.

Lerah Parker, who along with husband Mel, owned a nursery and home on the former site of the Grace sorting plant, said guidelines need to be established for the EPA to follow in evaluating a home or property before cleanup.

Max suggested the community needed legal help to establish such guidelines.

Gary Spencer, vice president of Glacier Bank in Libby and a member of the Community Advisory Group, said he wondered if all buildings needed to be cleaned when some tests have come back showing zero contamination in the living spaces.

"I'm not opposed to this, I'm concerned about going too fast," he said.

Spencer also expressed concerns with the national implication of cleaning up Libby since the material was used nationwide.

Roger Johnson said he grew up playing in vermiculite piles of a processing plant in Spokane.

"Will this have national implications?" Johnson asked. "Yes, it will. It should and we shouldn't be afraid of that."

Baucus said that when the Superfund law was passed, Congress — both Democrats and Republicans — decided that the companies and corporations who created the problem were responsible for the cleanup and associated costs, he said.

Baucus closed the meeting appealing to Libby residents to continue working together.

"It is critical that Libby keep working together," he said. "It's a wonderful opportunity to turn the corner for this community."